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Better Together

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Better Together

Bill Gates once told a group of state governors that support for liberal arts education should be cut, and the money given to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) programs. Vinod Khosla, formerly of Sun Microsystems, has said that not much being taught in liberal arts programs is relevant to the future. And, Netscape founder Mark Andreessen predicted those who learn the soft skills of liberal arts will end up working in shoe stores. As *Washington Post* education reporter Valerie Strauss put it in a March 2016 article, “Trashing the liberal arts seems to have become practically a sport” (Hartley 208). If the liberal arts are so useless, why is LinkedIn run by Reid Hoffman, a philosophy major? How could Ben Silberman lead Pinterest with only a political science degree? And, how did Hewlett-Packard survive under Carly Fiorina, with her degree in medieval history? Good questions, says Scott Hartley, and he tries to answer them in *The Fuzzy and the Techie: Why the Liberal Arts will rule the Digital World*. Seeing liberal arts majors running tech enterprises seems contradictory. But, if anyone’s going to figure out why, it’s Hartley himself; a venture capitalist today, with stops at Google and Facebook, and a degree in Political Science. He’s a Fuzzy among Techies, the two terms he heard at Stanford to describe the tech-proficient and those not. “My education taught me that I wouldn’t be graduating with a second-class set of skills to those learned by techies across campus,” he writes, “but rather a complementary set of skills...necessary in today’s technology driven economy” (7). He and others like him must have found encouragement in Apple pioneer Steve Jobs, who said that “technology alone is not enough-it’s technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the result that makes our heart sing” (7). But, says Hartley, getting both parties to the altar has been an uphill battle, and the liberal arts have been taking heat from politicians, especially when they think there are votes to be won. He reports that Jeb Bush suggested universities should warn psych majors that they’ll end up working for Chick-fil-A, and that Florida senator Marco Rubio thinks welders make more money than philosophy majors “because the market for Greek philosophers is tight” (208). While

that rhetoric may get laughs on the campaign trail, Hartley suggests it's the Fuzzies and not the Techies who'll have the last laugh. He offers a 2016 *Wall Street Journal* survey of 900 executives, 92% of whom said the soft skills Fuzzies possess were "equally important or more important than technical skills" (206).

So, just what are those "soft skills," and how come the Fuzzies have them, and the Techies don't? Hartley says journalist Fareed Zakaria nailed it in his 2015 book *In Defense of a Liberal Education*. Zakaria claims that the liberal arts "highlights creativity, problem solving, decision making, persuasive arguing and management skills" (Hartley 14). Hartley adds a few of his own. "The humanities and the social sciences are devoted to the study of human nature. The greatest opportunities for innovation are in applying evolving technological capabilities...to solve human problems like political corruption, finding better ways to educate children, helping people live healthier and happier lives. Workers with a solid liberal arts education have a strong foundation to build on in pursuing these goals" (15). Liberal arts students are required to study a broad range of subjects. "In our ever-changing world," he argues, "the demand for intellectual agility, creativity, and the curiosity to explore new terrain is higher than ever" (26). The development of these skills is the reason he says so many employers are hiring liberal arts grads, no matter what the tech titans may say. And, while he cites findings published in *Liberal Education*, claiming 74% of employers say a liberal arts education is the best way to prepare for success in today's global economy (28), probably eliciting howls of bias, he follows that up with LinkedIn's 2015 study of the job market, which concluded that "liberal arts grads are joining the tech workforce more rapidly than technical grads" (28).

How could this have happened? It happened, says Hartley, because the Fuzzies avoided the specialization trap which ensnared their Techie contemporaries. "It is actually in the STEM fields that specialization is more of a problem," he claims, "with the course loads for many degrees leaving little room for...pursuit of intellectual passions..." (Hartley 25). And, he allows Georgia Nugent, a senior fellow at the Council of Independent Colleges to assess the consequences of tech specialization. "It's a horrible irony," she writes in an article for *Fast Company*, "that at the very moment the world

become more complex, we're encouraging our young people to be highly specialized. We are doing a disservice to our young people by telling them that life is a straight path" (26).

So, the Techies have no soft skills, and the Fuzzies lack technical chops. Now what? Hartley has an answer: teamwork. He devotes several chapters to potential advances in medicine and education if both sides could see they're really just two sides of the same coin. But he singles out the importance of collaboration in the area of national security. "Harnessing... new technologies to combat escalating threats is essential," he writes, "so collaboration between Techies and those with the skills and perspectives of both the humanities and social sciences is critical" (Hartley 181). There is a case to be made, he argues, for what Fuzzies can add to understanding the complexities of conflicts, their causes, and the limits of technology in war. And, while he admits high-tech weapons have certainly helped take fallible human judgment out of the equation of battlefield conflict, "Fuzzy prowess is and will be, critical to waging war" (183).

The Fuzzy and the Techie can overwhelm the reader with the surveys and data it brings to make the case that Fuzzies will thrive in an ever-evolving world. And, the subtitle, which predicts they'll actually rule that world is a bit contradictory, given the many examples the author supplies to suggest it's a better world if it's shared. And, while it's tempting to embrace Voltaire's view that it's time to judge a person on the basis of their questions, not their answers, it's Hartley's view that those who think they have the answers and those who constantly question how the answers were arrived at can coexist.

Hartley, Scott. *The Fuzzy and the Techie: Why the Liberal Arts Will Rule the Digital World*. Houghton Mifflin, 2017.

-John Morello